

GREETINGS IN AFRICA – BEYOND THE HANDSHAKE

An essay on greeting and leave-taking rituals as communication practice in Sub-Saharan African Agrarian Societies

SAUDAÇÕES EM ÁFRICA - ALÉM DO APERTO DE MÃO

Um ensaio sobre os rituais de saudação e despedida como prática de comunicação em sociedades agrárias da África Subsaariana

SALUDOS EN ÁFRICA - MÁS ALLÁ DEL APRETÓN DE MANOS

Un ensayo sobre los rituales de saludo y despedida como práctica de comunicación en las sociedades agrarias del África subsahariana

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Resumo

Em Sociedades Agrárias Africanas, os rituais de saudação e despedida são uma parte essencial dos processos de comunicação que constituem essas sociedades como entidades coletivas. Por meio de formas elaboradas de saudação e despedida, as pessoas iniciam e encerram os processos de comunicação e interação dentro de uma estrutura de identidades e culturas coletivas. Complexos rituais de saudação permitem lidar com todas as formas de encontros, tanto com pessoas vivas quanto com os espíritos dos mortos. Os rituais de saudação são adquiridos por meio de longos períodos de aprendizagem. Seu domínio é o sinal de ser um adulto e membro competente da sociedade. Atores externos de diferentes culturas muitas vezes parecem não estar cientes das subtilidades desses rituais de saudação. Eles os ignoram com um custo. Este ensaio fornece algumas percepções do funcionamento interno de sociedades africanas no que diz respeito ao enquadramento dos seus processos de comunicação interna e externa. Estes que são tão importantes para as suas mundo-vivências como para as suas interações com actores externos de diferentes áreas. A análise das sociedades de uma forma compreensiva como entidades auto-organizadas dentro de uma matriz étnica demonstra claramente os limites de reduzir rituais de saudação a meros actos de fala entre indivíduos e atesta que alguns dos pressupostos básicos das modernas teorias de comunicação não são válidas para Sociedades Agrárias Africanas.

Palavras-chave: Comunicação africana; Saudação e despedida, Sociedades Agrárias Africanas, Comunicação intercultural.

Abstract

In African Agrarian Societies greeting and leave-taking rituals are an essential part of the communication processes that constitute these societies as collective entities. Through elaborate forms of greeting and leave-taking people initiate and end communication and interaction processes within a framework of collective identities and cultures. Intricate greeting rituals allow to deal with all forms of encounters, with living people as well as with the spirits of the deceased. Greeting rituals are acquired through lengthy periods of learning. Their mastery is the sign of

being an adult and competent member of society. External actors from different cultures often seem to be unaware of the subtleties of these greeting rituals. They ignore them at a cost. This essay provides some insights into the inner workings of African societies concerning the framing of most of their internal and external communication processes that are as vital for their lifeworlds as they are for their interaction with external actors from different spheres. Analysing the societies in a comprehensive manner as self-organising entities within an ethnic matrix clearly shows the limits of reducing greeting rituals to mere speech acts between individuals and proves that some of the fundamental assumptions of modern communication theories are not valid for African Agrarian Societies.

Key words: African communication; Greeting and Leave-taking, African Agrarian Societies, Intercultural communication.

Resumen

En las Sociedades Agrarias Africanas, los rituales de saludo y despedida son parte esencial de los procesos de comunicación que constituyen estas sociedades como entidades colectivas. A través de elaboradas formas de saludo y despedida, las personas inician y terminan los procesos de comunicación e interacción dentro de un marco de identidades y culturas colectivas. Los complejos rituales de saludo permiten lidiar con todo tipo de encuentros, tanto con personas vivas como con espíritus de los muertos. Los rituales de saludo se adquieren a través de largos períodos de aprendizaje. Su dominio es señal de ser un miembro adulto y competente de la sociedad. Los actores externos de diferentes culturas a menudo parecen desconocer las sutilezas de estos rituales de saludo. Los ignoran a un costo. Este ensayo proporciona algunas ideas sobre el funcionamiento interno de las sociedades africanas en términos de enmarcar sus procesos de comunicación internos y externos. Estos son tan importantes por sus mundovivencias como por sus interacciones con actores externos de diferentes áreas. El análisis exhaustivo de las sociedades como entidades autoorganizadas dentro de una matriz étnica demuestra claramente los límites de reducir los rituales de saludo a meros actos de habla entre individuos y atestigua que algunos de los supuestos básicos de las teorías modernas de la comunicación no son válidos para las sociedades agrarias africanas.

Palabras clave: Comunicación africana; Saludo y despedida, Sociedades Agrarias Africanas, Comunicación intercultural.

Introductory observations ¹

Why deal with greeting and leave-taking in African Agrarian Societies? The reasons for writing this essay are manifold.

In many African countries, Agrarian Societies are still extremely important. For one, they still are, under ever more precarious conditions, the lifeworlds² of about half of the

¹ The authors wish to thank Michel Dupont, Ricardo Falcão, Sara Bernardo, Magdalena Bialoborska, Ewald Dietrich and Christoph Rottke for valuable comments and suggestions.

² The concept lifeworld (Lebenswelt) developed by Husserl in his *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* (HUSSERL, 1976) was developed and integrated into his communicative action theory by Habermas: “By communicating frontally with each other about something in a world, speakers and listeners move within the horizon of their common lifeworld; this remains at the back of the participants as an intuitively known, unproblematic and indecomposable holistic background. [...] The lifeworld can only be seen a tergo. From the frontal perspective of the subjects themselves, who act in an understanding-oriented manner, the lifeworld, which is always only given along, must elude thematisation. As a totality that makes possible the identities and life-historical designs of groups and individuals, it is only pre-reflexively present. From the perspective of the participants, it is possible to reconstruct the practical knowledge of rules sedimented in utterances, but not the receding context and the resources of the lifeworld as a whole that remain behind.” (Original text in German). (HABERMAS, 1985).

Note that communication is here posited as a process between (only) two types of actors, speaker and listener.

population in most countries. They are also the societies of origin for many people living in urban centres, and therefore they are the source for most of their culture and still have a strong influence over much of the more modern parts of African societies. These Agrarian Societies may be perceived to be relatively simple with low levels of formal, codified knowledge and of technological development and accumulated material wealth. However, these societies are highly complex, rich, and strive for wisdom. Their wealth lies in their spiritual and social life. They have been managing their life in changing and ever more difficult circumstances for many thousand years. And, although they are, in a strictly material sense, resource poor, they have, in the past, been able to partially withstand all kinds of external attacks and proven their resilience³.

Modernity in many forms is reaching most of these societies to varying degrees. This is especially true of sophisticated, but easy to use, communication technologies which seem to proliferate faster than technologies in other areas. But for most of these societies, the effects of this modernisations have not yet affected their essential internal and external communications, which are perceived to be fundamental dimensions of their organisation and, therefore, their existence.

Whoever wants to communicate or interact with African Agrarian Societies, being insider or outsider, has to pass through the initial and the final stage of communication, which are greeting and leave-taking. Outside actors, from non-African societies, experience specific difficulties when communicating with agrarian societies, but so do many Africans from urban milieus⁴. The reasons for the interaction may be administration, trade, development, humanitarian intervention, research, or others. For many, the greeting and leave-taking appears to be one of the first obstacles for good communication or interaction.

In the context of African Agrarian Societies, greeting rituals seem to be invisible intercultural communication barriers that contribute to frustrate the well-intentioned plans of many external actors who want to interact with them. These greeting rituals constitute the framing of most communication processes, internal and external alike.

³ Cf. (TEMUDO; SCHIEFER, 2003).

⁴ In a series of university seminars in Lisbon, a demonstration of traditional forms of greeting by Africans from Agrarian Societies provoked reactions of astonishment and professions of ignorance from Africans from urban milieus.

They put communication into context. They do this rather efficiently. Only by observing the multiple contexts in which they occur, the sense of communication processes can be fully understood. The context of human communication is no less complex than the human societies in and between which it occurs. The myriad of phenomena that need to be considered - or ignored - for a meaningful analysis is as rich as the human existence.

It is one of the most striking features of the modern world that the incredibly fast advancing technologies equally invade and dominate mass communication as well as individual communication. In consequence, individuals in highly developed industrial societies suffer more and more from social isolation and loneliness, because they lose the capacity to build strong social ties and societies lose their internal cohesion. The loss of the subtleties of direct, personal social communication and interaction, and the loss of empathy therefore comes at a cost⁵.

For people from more industrialised societies, the experience with societies that consider direct personal interaction as fundamental for their existence and put great store to the mastery of interpersonal communication, might give them a better understanding of human societies, even of their own. It might raise their awareness that the substitution of direct personal contact by sophisticated technology may exact a very high price on the human existence because it implies losing much of what cannot be transmitted by technology and media.

Thus, trying to understand the intricacies of greeting rituals as social interaction in not (yet) completely technology dominated societies might be useful to understand what modern societies⁶ are losing and what African Agrarian Societies might lose if they are invaded by communication technology, a process that has already started.

Giving more attention to greeting rituals when dealing with African Agrarian Societies might help to reduce frustration, improve communication by avoiding misunderstandings, and, in general, increase the chances for success in all kind of interventions, most notably in research and development.

⁵ Especially in hostile environments which seem to increase in Western societies, the reading of other peoples' intention may become more important (Michel Dupont, personal communication).

⁶ Cf. the seminal study by Alan Blum (BLUM, 2016).

As greeting rituals are universal⁷, that is, all human societies use them⁸, and train their members in their correct use, they are considered “natural” by most people. The non-obvious specifics of these rituals in different societies often go more or less unnoticed or are only superficially adopted by people who want to interact with them.

In order to learn, it is necessary to recognise first a lack of knowledge which needs to be overcome⁹. Greeting, however, cannot be learned by the book. The greeting rituals are as manifold as are the African Societies, so they have to be learned in practice, and from and for each society in its own way. There is no quick fix. Neither the wisdom of African Agrarian Societies, nor that of other cultures, nor their greeting rituals can be distilled and nicely packaged into a book or file for global consumption.

A few remarks on methodology

In this essay we try to summarise direct and participatory observations and draw some conclusions from the authors’ research and work experiences in African societies which span four decades and include work with dozens of societies. We consider the eyes and ears, and a few other senses, of the trained researcher as legitimate sources of knowledge¹⁰.

This essay is not the result of a specific research project directed at studying greeting and leave-taking rituals, but rather a reflection of direct personal interaction with a wide range of societies that implied many years of formal and informal education and coaching received

⁷ Greeting rituals have been widely studied, both historically and globally. An extensive bibliography on Greeting and Leave-taking by Joachim Knuf from 1990 lists 297 titles, but only five with direct reference to Africa. (KNUF, 1990).

⁸ The study of human societies from a socio-biological perspective also shows clearly that there exist some common biological traits. This is valid for the individual as well as for the societal level. The multiplicity and diversity of greeting rituals, as numerous as the societies and their cultures, therefore, have some common basic features. They are deeply rooted in human nature. “The facial expressions displaying the basic emotions of fear, loathing, anger, surprise, and happiness appear to be invariant traits of all human beings” (WILSON, 1978, p. 61).

⁹ There seems to be not much space given in training or preparation programmes for external actors, nor for Africans hailing from urban milieus who are African and therefore do not seem to notice that there might be a problem. This would suggest including the greeting rituals into the training programmes for researchers and other outside actors who are dealing with agrarian societies.

¹⁰ We refrain from discussing in detail the contributions of other authors who have worked in the same area of research – the references of their works are given for further reading - which is often quite rewarding. We also exclude here the exchange of gifts between people which is quite frequent and often seems to be closely related to the greeting rituals. But although important for the establishment and maintenance of social relations and sometimes interwoven with the greeting rituals, it is a different phenomenon that is already well studied.

by the authors who were engaged in research with and about African societies as well as in development projects. In these contexts, often apparently innocent and well-intentioned behaviour led to mistakes, ranging from simple gaffes to outright blunders. As in many other learning processes, these errors proved to be the best of teachers. Quite often they put the patience of African friends and colleagues to the test. Through lengthy processes of subtle nudging as well as formal orientations, over time communication and interaction processes slowly improved and provided a more fruitful access to the Agrarian Societies. Close observation as well as imitation, one of the most traditional appropriation methods, also proved to be invaluable approaches. The societies the authors worked with, are, as so many other African societies, heavily traumatised. Their traumata are not just material losses suffered in prolonged anticolonial and civil wars, but many of them have also been hurt deep in their souls. These traumata may be farther or closer to the external or internal communication processes. When analysing the framing of these processes, as in greeting and leave-taking rituals, these phenomena are not just external circumstances. They should not be simply ignored, nor can they be easily factored into an analytical framework. They are essential for the understanding of the societies. The deeper sense lies here in the context, as will be shown in a few examples. This naturally poses questions for methodology. Evidently the most commonly used toolboxes for social research, such as surveys, interviews, etc. do not provide adequate instruments for understanding phenomena which are central to the human existence but reach also beyond what can be easily observed.

The object of reflection encompasses a wide series of distinct and diverse societies spanning many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. As each society has specific greeting and leave-taking rituals – in fact these rituals serve as initial markers of identity and distinction of persons, groups, and societies alike – it is important to get the level of abstraction right, when analysing more than one or just a few of them in a comparative perspective.

Therefore, we analyse African Agrarian Societies here as ideal-type (*Idealtypus*), in the tradition of Max Weber¹¹, that is, as an instrument of heuristics which also permits the formulation of hypotheses. Thus, the construction of societies as ideal-type attempts to build an abstract model that, although not identical with any of the societies under analysis, provides the

¹¹ See Max Weber's interpretative sociology (WEBER; WINCKELMANN, 1985).

typical characteristics of each one and allows, through a process of differentiation, a better understanding of specific societies as well as a meaningful delimitation of the analysis.

Communication in African Agrarian Societies

African Agrarian Societies are not “societies of individuals”¹². nor are they membership organisations of the modern type. They are collective societies in the true sense of the word. They are acutely aware of who belongs and who does not. Membership appears as a natural process. Members are born to members, grow up in the societies, live and die as members and continue to be members after their death. Membership encompasses the living as well as the dead. Through their cult of the ancestors the African Agrarian Societies recognise their biotic heritage, as well as the origin of their culture, language, knowledge and, last but not least, their access to natural resources and political alliances as well as their carefully tended enmities. Much, but by no means all, of their knowledge is codified in rituals. The constitution of their societies is transmitted through their myths and their cosmologies.

These societies are therefore real entities. Their relationship with their environment, their plan, understood as the distribution of work, access to resources (land, water, fish, game, transport, to name just a few), and production is transmitted in their social structure. The social organisation is codified in a genealogical charter with a territorial extension, with or without a central power institution¹³. The ancestors, disembodied as they may be, are placeholders in this charter which would not be possible without them. Their existence is considered as no less real, although quite different from that of living members. For African Societies their sway over the lives of living members is undisputable¹⁴.

Their social structure is based on descent, on social gender differentiation and on age classes. Their identities are based on belonging, place, language, and culture. Most of the African Agrarian Societies also comprise a hidden military organisation.

By their own perception, a constitutive dimension of these collective societies is their collective soul. This is considered the essence of their being, represented in spiritual entities,

¹² Cf. (ELIAS, 2017).

¹³ Cf. (SIGRIST, 2005).

¹⁴ In Western industrialised societies the influence of the dead over the living is widely ignored and may lead to subconscious individual introjection. This process can be perceived as correspondent to trauma processes where collective traumata appear as fractured individual traumata and are treated as such. (Ewald Dietrich, personal communication).

that gives their societies not just their internal cohesion, but their existence. The personal soul, of living and dead people, is perceived as part of this collective soul.

In a more modern European scientific perspective, these and other societies are united through their collective subconscious¹⁵. The communication with this collective subconscious is largely symbolic.

European inspired modern societies consider the ascent of the individuum one of their main achievements¹⁶. This fact has been constitutive for advancement of most sciences, as for instance economics, politics, sociology, and psychology. The expansion of Western thought has produced a certain blindness when it comes to the understanding of non-individuum based societies¹⁷.

In African Societies the locus of control is much more external than in individuum-based societies.

The spirits of the ancestors, members of the societies, as well as the spirits that represent the forces of nature, are therefore constructions of extra-individual and extra-personal dimensions of the human existence. The forces of nature regulate the access to the natural resources. They are perceived as real. They are a *fait social*¹⁸.

African Agrarian Societies are, in sum, entities with productive, reproductive, territorial, cultural, linguistic, military, and spiritual dimensions. They are, equally, cognitive and decision-making entities providing the limitations to the cognitive resonance space that societies need in order to self-organise themselves¹⁹. The communicative processes are

¹⁵ C.G. Jung developed the theory about this collective soul which he assumed to be part of all human societies. He named it the “collective unconscious” (JUNG, 2000). He described the importance of symbolic communication through which the archetypes that structure the collective subconscious reach the collective and individual consciousness (JUNG, 2000).

¹⁶ Cf. (ELIAS, 2017).

¹⁷ A notable exception has been the theoretical approach founded and inspired by C. G. Jung. Jung, a profound thinker with an extensive experience in clinical psychoanalysis who, based on personal experience, discovered that individual souls are part of a collective soul, whose manifestations he searched in European history as well as in non-European societies (JUNG; JAFFÉ, 1989). In this endeavour he undertook extensive travels with visits to non-European societies. He was also assisted by his friends, as for example by Richard Wilhelm, at the time arguably one of the best experts on the Chinese soul and philosophy. His studies included the Americas, Asia (WILHELM; JUNG, 2000) and Africa (JUNG; JAFFÉ, 1989; POST, 1987).

¹⁸ In the sense of Durkheim. (DURKHEIM, 2019).

¹⁹ In other words, they have not undergone the Great Transformation (Polanyi, 200(POLANYI, 2001)

fundamental and constitutive for their internal cohesion. Societies' existence, however, cannot be reduced to communication alone. It spans all dimensions of the human condition²⁰.

Their communication has to be analysed as a process of a collective and cannot be understood as the sum of communicative acts between individuals. In other words, the units of analysis, therefore, must be the societies, and not the communicative processes between individuals²¹.

Meeting others: identification, relationships and performance

The initial processes when meeting others constitute reductions of complexity that span different levels and multiple areas. They function with cues, signals, symbols, and codes. They reach from the elementary biotic to social and cultural stereotypes and archetypes. The initial friend-foe identification, as well as the male-female identification, are involuntary and happen so fast that they are virtually unconscious. Further classifications range from known to unknown as well as from affinities and similarities to differences that allow for elementary categorisations into stereotypes and can trigger the activation of archetypes.

The ingroup-outgroup distinction in collective societies has important dimensions that are, in the same way as the constitution of the corresponding identities, conjunctural, contextual, situational and, most important, relational²².

One of the most basic emotions is fear. Its counterpoint is trust. Distance and difference indicate and trigger fear, trust is produced by belonging, closeness, proximity, shared experience²³ and similarity. In societies that are organised and codified through genealogical charters, closeness, and trust, real or metaphorical, are expressed through kinship categories.

²⁰ Cf. Arendt & Canovan, (1998).

²¹ This severely limits the heuristic value of the Shannon model of communication. (SHANNON; WEAVER, 1998).

²² Conjunctural: is there war or peace, are things going well or is there a catastrophe? Contextual: who is present, is it day or night, where does the meeting take place? Relational: who is the other? Higher or lower or of the same social standing as indicated by age, status, reputation, etc. Is there proximity, established relationships, shared experience, etc.

²³ Jung stated his ideas, in the language of his time: "The intellectual type is afraid of being caught by feeling because his feeling has an archaic quality, and there he is like an archaic man – he is the helpless victim of his emotions. It is for this reason that primitive man is extraordinarily polite, he is very careful not to disturb the feelings of his fellows because it is dangerous to do so. Many of our customs are explained by that archaic politeness. For instance, it is not the custom to shake hands with somebody and keep your left hand in your pocket, or behind your back, because it must be visible that you do not carry a weapon in that hand. The Oriental greeting of bowing with hands extended palms upward means "I have nothing in my hands." If you kowtow you dip your head to the feet of the other man so that he sees you are absolutely defenceless and that you trust

In societies self-organised according to an ethnic matrix²⁴, the internal constitution of personal, family and group relations is a continuous process that entails constant confirmation as a counterpoint to ubiquitous tensions and centrifugal tendencies. This requires a strong ritualisation of these relationships which can assume the forms of power, authority, and influence²⁵. The ritualisation helps to define and manage the tension between stability and change and maintain a fluid disequilibrium that is characteristic for these societies.

Most societies based on kinship and descent also produce ritualised organisation forms that transcend the limits of families and descent groups, such as age classes, neighbourhoods, women's organisations, and the like, where relationships are collegial. In all societies individual friendships also play an important role.

The self-classification of belonging and place in society ("one's station in life") is always relational and expressed on the axis of respect or fear towards others. The communication processes involved, of which greetings are an important part, constitute, through their recurrence, acts of self-affirmation, as well as the affirmation of the other. They can also be expressions of change, either through explicit change rituals, such as grading from one age group to the next, from unmarried to married, etc., or subtle negotiation processes that

him completely. You can still study the symbolism of manners with primitives, and you can also see why they are afraid of the other fellow." (JUNG; JUNG, 1976).

²⁴ 'Kinship and marriage' is probably one of most studied areas in social anthropology. We follow here in the footsteps of Sigrist, who built his theories on acephalous societies debating the perspectives of Radcliffe-Brown, Fortes, Evans-Pritchard, (FORTES; EVANS-PRITCHARD; INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN INSTITUTE, 2010) Leach, and many others.
"Tribe' can be defined non- essentialistically: Belief in a common ancestry that represents social interrelationships, is reflected in a genealogical charter that provides the formal framework for social disposition and is spatially expressed. Such a unity need not be represented by a chief." (Original text in German).."
(SIGRIST, 2005). To this definition Schiefer in his study about West African societies added a spiritual dimension and a - mostly hidden - military organisation. "Spiritual dimension here stands for the entire realm of the magical and the extrasensory, that is, powers beyond the categories of the mind that societies or social groups believe exist." (Original text in German). (SCHIEFER, 2002).

The theoretical approach developed by Sigrist (SIGRIST, 2005) in his ground-breaking work about segmented societies allows for a more profound analysis of kinship-based societies. Positing kinship as an underlying principle of self-organising societies within the ethnic matrix enables connectivity, that is the construction of theoretical bridges to a wider field of theories that contribute to the study of societies, such as socio-biology, sociology, social anthropology, political science, system theory, communication theory, cybernetics, to name just the most obvious.

²⁵ In many societies power and authority are largely exercised in secret. Therefore, the visual part of the rituals that signify power or authority only constitute a small part of the hierarchical relationships that structure these societies.

strive for a slow change over time in relationships. They are a subtle way of expressing the dynamics of social change.

Most meetings that involve greetings happen in a social context, mostly in the presence of others. Even if others are not physically present, meetings will or might be reported to them. So, greetings tend to be imbued with a dimension of performance. They range between participant observation and observant participation. The performative dimension serves as a self-affirmation, as a confirmation of belonging and relational status²⁶, and as a demonstration of status and proper, adequate behaviour to others present. The greeting act will be influenced by the presence of others, either directly, as they are part of the performance, or indirectly, as witnesses present will eventually carry the message to others. In relatively closed communities where the capacity to act and well-being of people depends strongly on the opinion of others, social status is partly construed in this way.

This naturally provokes the use of ambiguities, subtle and not too subtle lies, and manoeuvrings to increase one's status and the corresponding defensive strategies to detect and to deny ambitions which are not considered appropriate.

The performative dimension of greetings has also brought about a wide range of secret cues and signals that allow people to exchange messages of group identification, or about other issues, without other people present noticing the hidden part of the communication.

Quite often greetings also show emotional states, as feelings are frequently expressed. When strong enough, these expressions of feelings might vibrate with others and alter their emotional state too.

The performative aspect also has an important role in the transmission of knowledge – younger and less experienced people are constantly exposed to the relational behaviour of elders and learn through imitation.

The myriad individual acts of greeting are thus processed collectively and are part of a more comprehensive process of information and knowledge management of societies.

²⁶ In extreme cases the refusal can signify that either the presence or, in rarer cases, the existence of a person, is ignored and the person is treated as a “nonperson”.

African forms of greeting as a social practice

In societies where a handshake still is a handshake between people and not the establishment of a link between computers, and which are not yet dominated by technology, personal contact and communication are of prime importance²⁷. Many communication processes in Sub-Saharan African Agrarian Societies have a very distinct initial phase, the greetings, as well as an equally distinct concluding phase, the leave-taking or farewell.

These relatively short phases are essential for most communication processes. The greeting rituals are not mere formalities. At first glance, to the external observer from Western (or rather Northern) societies, they may not even look very formal but rather informal and are often either admired for the human warmth displayed between people or dismissed as quaint customs and a waste of time.

In fact, even considering the apparent informality of daily greetings, as for example between kinfolks, colleagues, friends or neighbours, greetings are extremely elaborate rituals which we can situate on a scale from the apparently informal to the completely formal, from the seemingly casual to the highly significant.

In collective societies where the collective is more valued than the individual, or in other words, in societies which have not produced the “individual” as the dominant figure in society, as industrialising European societies did from the XVIII century onwards, social status (perceived as status of the family or group) is of the greatest importance in order to achieve social and economic goals, e.g., the reputation and wellbeing of the family or group. Persons in these societies are not free in the sense that they act just on their own without much consideration for their groups and societies: their behaviour will always reflect on some bigger entity and they are well aware of this fact. It is not by chance that responsibility is considered one of the basic values of their education, as is the avoidance of shame. With growing age, children learn that they will have to respond to somebody for their actions, usually by being threatened with or exposed to shame. This contrasts strongly with Western (but not necessarily Eastern) industrialised societies where economic achievements may more easily translate into

²⁷ Cf. the ground-breaking work of Wilson (SOOLA; BATTA; NWABUEZE, 2010) (WILSON, 1989), (WILSON, 1987) and the excellent collection of essays by Ansu-Kyeremeh (ANSU-KYEREMEH, 2005).

social status of the individual than the other way around and where the relationship between people and property seems to be more firmly grounded than the relationship between people.

In African Agrarian Societies, social relations are continually under external and internal stress, even if this might not be much in evidence to the casual observer. Given the nearly ubiquitous social tensions, social relations require continual maintenance. The management of social relations demands unceasing efforts in order to sustain working relationships within the social groups that are a precondition for their functioning under ever more precarious conditions. The maintenance of external and internal peace is considered as fundamental as keeping the pervasive forces of evil at bay, which are perceived as a constant threat to the societies' internal harmony.

People of African Agrarian Societies, in general, are mostly very polite and sociable. In many societies the *joie de vivre* seems ubiquitous. Good manners and friendliness are considered essential and are sustained by their ancient cultures of which they are well aware.

Many people also cultivate a fine sense of humour.

The relevance these societies attribute to interpersonal relations is manifest in many ways. One of these aspects is the greeting in all its dimension as a social practice.

Greeting and talking

One of the most elaborate forms of communication in human societies is the language. This is, without any doubt, also valid for the greeting rituals. Greeting as a speech act has been widely studied and valuable knowledge has been produced²⁸. It is fundamental to be able to use the correct and adequate language in the greeting and the societies take considerable effort to teach the appropriate words and forms of greeting. People from African Agrarian Societies, who have to deal with other Agrarian Societies or with people from the city, will often learn the language of the greeting forms of the others. The other dimensions of the greeting rituals they already know. The more exposed to external contacts also learn the forms most used in national languages or international forms as transported by the media or by strangers. These forms are used by many, and they allow the establishment of a first contact. Applying them in

²⁸ For African societies, very interesting studies have appeared, many of them from a linguistic or socio-linguistic perspective (cf. (MMADIKE; OKOYE, 2015)(MATHIAS; ONYIMA, 2015) (NADEN, 1980)(AKINDELE, 1990).

greetings is considered a sign of respect and people after concluding the greeting rituals then switch more easily to a common language for serious conversations.

The exchange of words, is however, only one dimension of the greeting – and the concentration on greetings as a speech act, by practitioners as well as by researchers, often seems to lead to a certain indifference towards other, no less important, dimensions.

Before the greeting: the encounter, the first contact

In African Agrarian Societies, first contacts of some relevance are often preceded by expectations, by pre-knowledge, by premonitions, by presentiment, or overshadowed by forebodings or general anticipation – which might be specific or diffuse and vary widely from person to person and from situation to situation.

Surprises are common enough, so that specific mechanisms to deal with such situations have evolved.

The range of available greeting forms is extremely varied and covers nearly all types of encounters. But not all encounters result in a greeting.

The first contact may happen at a certain distance; in most cases, this contact morphs into a greeting ritual. Some basic perceptions, based on learning, attention, pre-existing rules, intuition, and implicit expectations²⁹, however, precede the initiation of the greeting.

Other human beings might be perceived as friend, foe or potential mate³⁰. This is probably the first (and incredibly fast – it takes only a split second) perception that underlies and translates into the first distinction when meeting another person: man or woman, adult, or child?

Women are generally not perceived as an imminent physical threat. Neither are children³¹.

²⁹ Cf. (KAHNEMAN, 2011).

³⁰ “Friend-foe identification” is now better known as a term used in modern military systems, but in fact is probably one of the oldest human recognition needs.

³¹ Gun-toting children in war-torn societies seem to be exception. The general revulsion apparent in most of the reports about them confirms that this violates basic principles of expected of behaviour in human societies.

This corresponds to a general pattern: is there a danger? If friend, no danger. If foe, which kind of danger?³² Is the other predator or possible prey? Can the situation be managed, can danger be averted, neutralised, or suspended?

The general context, location, and surroundings play a significant part in the classification of people encountered³³. So do other aspects: how many people are there? Are they armed? What kind of transport do they use? How are they dressed? Can they be identified with any known group? How do they behave? What kind of signals do they send? What do they want? Can they be neutralised or controlled?

If not foe, can they be identified? What category or group of people do they belong to? Does anybody know them? Has their arrival been announced beforehand? How do they arrive?

If people encountered belong to a group that is known and with which relations exists, the greeting is initiated after a first identification. If the other is unknown, the pervasive general distrust keeps everybody reserved. This distrust may rapidly morph into fear, especially in societies heavily traumatised by war and violence³⁴.

An example may illustrate this. During field work in Mozambique in 1997, just four years after the end of a brutal and protracted civil war, on a Sunday morning a colleague and one of the authors visited the countryside in an area that had seen prolonged and heavy fighting during the civil war. Entering a village in a white Lada Niva was not a good idea³⁵. When the villagers saw the car, their reaction was shock. Instantly, nearly everybody turned and prepared to run. Only when we got out of the car and showed that we were unarmed and friendly, tensions eased somewhat. A later visit, although previously announced and accompanied by a man from the village, to the compound of a local teacher provoked uncontrollable trembling attacks in the head of the household.

³² The (largely biological) behavioural patterns to a perceived threat that produces fear are threefold: tonic immobility or *thanatosis* (“freezing” or “playing possum”), flight or attack.

³³ Venturing outside of the space of the village and familiar surroundings may be perceived as risky and requires preparation and care. Only courageous people such as hunters or warriors or thieves venture into the dark alone or in small groups – others try to avoid it if they can or at least prefer to go in bigger groups and in daylight.

³⁴ Cf. (SCHEPER-HUGHES, 2007)

³⁵ We later found out that white Ladas were widely and, on the whole, correctly, associated with the secret police.

Greeting: the initial phase

Greetings are usually initiated from a physical distance by typical distance signals³⁶. These can include looks, facial expressions, hand signals and gestures, body movements, and even calls.

When the identification phase passes, and a direct greeting is possible or required, the greeting in presence is initiated.

Depending on the type of greeting, during the exchange of the common formulas, gestures, and movements, a wide range of information is exchanged. Part of it subliminally, part helped by some more or less subtle interview techniques, before the phase of a tentative harmonisation maybe slowly entered. A reading of intentions, of personality and of agendas, hidden or open, based on keen senses and sharp antennae, is tried out and tested.

The greeting ritual may be understood as a kind of a multisensorial tuning process. Tentative signals are sent out to see how the other party reacts, and are then adapted to the signals received until a common “wavelength” can be found and tested. This is one of the reasons why greetings may take rather a long time and be repeated until harmony can be reached. In friendly situations a certain playfulness might appear which can help to overcome insecurities and uncertainties regarding status and personal moods and dispositions.

The ambiguity and imprecision apparent in the greetings as well as in conversations are in fact, given the circumstances, a much more effective way of communicating than a precisely coded scientific or technical language could ever be³⁷. They are, therefore, not only tolerated but welcomed and even taught. So is the correct use of meaningful pauses and silences.

The apparent elusiveness and openness allow for the detection of a much broader range of signals. If a party sends out vague signals, this leaves much more space for the other to react and to introduce their own interpretation and meaning which, in turn, allow for a deeper reading

³⁶ Many of the distance signals seem to be nearly universal, such as showing open hands to signal that one is unarmed.

³⁷ “Sin ambigüedad no se puede hablar de nada que valga la pena” (GÓMEZ DÁVILA, 2007).

of the other. The wider oscillations at the beginning of the greeting ritual permit the detection of subtle cues and signals³⁸ that might otherwise get lost³⁹.

As greeting is the ritual which provides the external form for the establishment of relations of the most complex organisms known⁴⁰, it requires a strong reduction of complexity that manifests itself in time-tested behavioural patterns. Persons involved in the greeting might be from the same or other societies. In the same way as people are an integral part of the societies, the societies and their cultures are represented in them. Therefore, the whole complexity of interacting (parts of) societies needs to be broken down and codified to a level where it can be handled in a practical way on different levels of competence by the actors involved without causing too much damage. This can be observed in many circumstances. The higher the conflict potential, the stricter the observance of the forms and patterns seems to be.

The value that African and other societies attribute to the greeting rituals and the strict adherence to traditional forms shows clearly that they are perfectly aware of their cultural and societal achievement. Daily experience shows that the ethnic identity and internal coherence of their societies are expressed also in these rituals, as in many others.

As the rituals involve the full range of body language, movements of bodies in space, body ornaments, mimic, gestures, facial expression, language as well as the surrounding situation and other external factors, they are exceptionally difficult to describe. The greeting rituals activate most of the five Aristotelian senses⁴¹, including smell and touch, as well as a few others, which are subliminal but of the utmost importance.

In numerous situations, and between many people, direct interpersonal communication, without visible or audible signals is not uncommon. Intuition in these societies has a much more encompassing role and is given much more significance than in industrialised societies. Where in Western societies intuition is understood on the level of the personal perception⁴² in African

³⁸ Cf. (HÖLLDOBLER; WILSON, 2009).

³⁹ These practices precede, probably by many thousand years, the modern neuro-linguistic programming approach with its stunning claims that, even after it has been, at least in part, scientifically discredited, still seems to be widely used in some areas where the manipulation of the other is seen as advantageous.

⁴⁰ The brain is a social organ, after all. Cf. (HÜTHER, 2010).

⁴¹ Sound and sight are the two senses that are privileged, to the detriment of the other senses, in Western industrialised societies, even in the sciences, as they can successfully be recorded, documented, enhanced and manipulated using audio and video technology.

⁴² In Western philosophy intuition is understood as “the power of obtaining knowledge that cannot be acquired either by inference or observation, by reason or experience. As such, intuition is thought of as an original,

Societies intuition is understood as a collective phenomenon of which the personal intuition is only a part. It is therefore necessary to provide space and opportunity to establish the link between personal and collective intuition.

Most people know from their own experience this direct communication especially between people who are close, such as mother and child or lovers⁴³. These processes cannot be observed directly, but only felt - which does not make them less important⁴⁴. In fact, they are quite often the most significant dimensions of greeting rituals. The symbolic dimension of communication which manifests itself in the greetings is of the essence. The formal greeting processes by means of their symbolic interaction, expressed through the external forms, with their own significance, provide space and opportunity for the subliminal, non-observable processes.

Some manifestations of this direct communication can, however, be observed. Consciously or unconsciously, in greetings people frequently imitate and assume the postures and expressions of the other party, and in mirroring the other try to pick up and understand their inner state of mind⁴⁵.

In societies where people's senses are not yet blunted by city environments and dulled by the extensive consumption of electronic media, their finely honed senses are much more tuned to the perception of other people.

The at least partly subconscious exchange of information through smell should not be ignored either. In fact, in many African and other cultures greeting rituals provide opportunities

independent source of knowledge, since it is designed to account for just those kinds of knowledge that other sources do not provide" (Encyclopædia Britannica. Ultimate Reference Suite., 2014).

"La «intuición» es la percepción de lo invisible, así como la «percepción» es la intuición de lo visible" (GÓMEZ DÁVILA, 2007).

⁴³ Modern neuroscience vaguely describes these processes of direct resonance as the action of mirror neurons. The electric signals different parts of the brain emit when stimulated, can be shown in real-time computer-produced images of brain scans. Now that computer produced images are available, these processes of direct communication that do not involve the five established senses, seem to become object of "modern scientific research". African and other societies have always known about this. So have philosophers, psychologists and numerous ancient scientists for a very long time.

⁴⁴ "I had the feeling", "I felt", "I simply knew" are phrases quite common in conversations.

⁴⁵ Jung expressed this, in the language of the time: "All in all, Negroes proved to be excellent judges of character. One of their avenues to insight lay in their talent for mimicry. They could imitate with astounding accuracy the manner of expression, the gestures, the gaits of people, thus, to all intents and purposes, slipping into their skins. I found their understanding of the emotional nature of others altogether surprising. I would always take the time to engage in the long palavers for which, they had a pronounced fondness. In this way I learned a great deal." (JUNG; JAFFÉ, 1989).

for the direct exchange of smells, such as kissing or embraces, or the rubbing of noses. The importance of smell in interpersonal communication is recognised by all societies; in industrialised societies the obsession with the oppression, substitution, or enhancement of body odours with chemicals is not by chance a multibillion-dollar business⁴⁶. The more basic relevance is however biological: in circumstances with a latent relation to reproductive selection, the compatibility or incompatibility of smells seem to indicate a possible genetic match with likely effects on the health of potential offspring.

In numerous encounters the smell of fear can be an indicator of power relations and much else. Smells also play a basic role in the general transmission of emotions between people.

The complexities of interpersonal, inter-group and interethnic relations are in a certain way condensed into the greeting rituals, as are the situational and personal affairs, concerns, states of mind and sensitivities.

Greetings to mark social status, proximity and distance

In societies where the exercise of power is more based on personal relationships than on abstract bureaucratic procedure or the like, greetings are a key feature for the establishment and maintenance of power relations⁴⁷.

Social status can be expressed and conferred by the way of greeting. There is a great number of cues and signals, not all of them obvious, many ambiguous, some only detectable with care, some only perceptible to the initiated⁴⁸.

Greetings also serve to define the boundaries between the spaces of the public, the private and the intimate. These areas vary in different cultures⁴⁹ and, in many instances, transgressions of the borders may lead to embarrassing situations. For one, the type of greeting is influenced by the setting of the meeting. The form of greeting selected can be used to

⁴⁶ The fear of body odours induced into the populations of industrialised Western societies by decades of marketing borders on the paranoia.

⁴⁷ As in certain kinds of European nobility these rituals can be used to mark people's position in society's hierarchy to the dot.

⁴⁸ People may introduce others using categories derived from the genealogical charter, such as "younger brother" to denote their lower status resulting from belonging to a social group deemed inferior, thus marking a social difference in protocol stemming from inter-ethnic hierarchies (Michel Dupont, personal communication). People may introduce themselves using similar categories into a group, stating their own lower age and therefore their respect for the older members of the group. Quite often the importance of the groups is expressed by external status symbols – quite often however by attitude and behaviour.

⁴⁹ Cf. Hannah Arendt for ancient Greek societies (ARENDD; CANOVAN, 1998).

delineate the character of the encounter, as well as to try to nudge the other into another sphere. So already in the act of greeting a subtle negotiation may take place to situate the following interaction somewhere on the axis public, private, intimate.

Children and youth of both sexes while passing through the age classes - which are marked by specific rituals - acquire different forms of greetings that mark their relative status in the social order. The higher they ascend, the more responsibility is required from them. While in the very young misbehaviour is more easily tolerated, in higher age classes they are expected to know how to distinguish the social status of their elders and to use the correct forms of address. The older people get, the more respect they are owed. The most common forms of address are derived from the kinship terminology or they refer, more in general, to the age class, the gender, and the marriage status.

In this way, the fluency of the forms allows through all the variations that the form permits, the most refined and subtle messages to be passed and the establishment and variation of intricate social distinction and relations up to a very high degree of sophistication. The mastery of the form manifests itself in the seemingly effortless ease and elegance that often disguise the proper form.

Many external factors, some of which may otherwise be taken for granted, influence the greeting rituals. Some may be more obvious than others. Where does the greeting take place? Who is present? Who is absent? What is the status of people present? Do they belong or are the strangers/foreigner/city people? Who may observe the greeting? What time of the day or night is it?

Types of greetings

Greetings are certainly one of the most frequent everyday matters, so the variations are wide-ranging as well as extremely hard to classify.

We will therefore first have a closer look at one of the most basic forms of greeting, the male handshake. Then we will describe a few assorted typical situations in which greetings take place to give an impression on the variety and complexity of circumstances which entail specific greeting rituals.

In order to demonstrate the impossibility of even adequately describing a simple gesture of greeting, a few forms shall be listed. Only a few dimensions shall be included. Other dimensions, no less relevant, will have to be ignored, although they are of crucial importance:

the surroundings, the choreography of bodies, mimic, languages employed, tone of voice, type of smile, lengths of contact, and many more features, not least all the secret signalling that often takes place.

Whatever information two bodies exchange when in direct physical contact through this interaction is not yet quite clear and certainly impossible to describe in a meaningful way. It must be important though – it is the standard greeting in many societies⁵⁰.

Let us just have a look at the handshake (between men⁵¹). The following list just serves to give an idea of the variety and wealth of forms that lie in one of the “simplest” gestures of greeting and leave taking.

- Simple handshake with right hand.
- Simple handshake with right hand, with additional emphasis given by swinging the hands widely.
- Double handshake, both hands touch both hands of the other.
- Handshake with right hand, left hand covers hand of the other.
- Handshake with right hand, left hand is pointed to or grips own right forearm close to hand. The further hand points up to the own arm, the more respect is expressed.
- Handshake with right hand, left hand grips own right forearm closer to elbow.
- Handshake with right hand, left hand moves to own upper arm.
- Handshake with right hand, left hand touches own breast to the right.
- Handshake with right hand, left hand moves to other’s forearm.
- Handshake with right hand, left hand moves to other’s elbow.
- Handshake with right hand, left hand moves to the other’s upper arm.
- Handshake with right hand, left hand moves to own upper arm, light bow away to the left, eyes averted.
- Handshake and simultaneous one-sided embrace.
- Handshake and (repeated) slap on the back.
- Handshake and after handshake, one-side embrace.

⁵⁰ To name just a few gradients: temperature, humidity, pressure, rhythm, duration, repetition, electrical charge, smell, vibrations, etc.

⁵¹ For a study about the female handshake see (HILLEWAERT, 2016).

- Handshake, gripping the others thumb. For this, the hand is offered higher than the elbow, with the thumb extended upwards. The thumbs are pressed against each other in a rubbing movement.
- Touching of closed fists, usually between youngsters, imitating the greeting of boxers, sometimes followed by gripping the other's thumb.
- Handshake and full embrace, simple, to one side.
- Handshake and following full embrace, double-sided.
- One-sided embrace, slapping the others belly (familiar gesture between personal friends in informal settings).
- If a handshake is not possible, apologies are necessary (hands busy, dirty, or wet). Handshake to be properly executed as soon as possible.
- An elbow may be proffered for contact in substitution if a handshake is not possible.
- A person of low status greeting a high-status person shakes right hand, left hand on own forearm and kneels down.
- A child or youngster approaching an old man, kneels down at a distance, claps hands and awaits to be called to approach and be greeted.

Usually, the higher up gives a cue and the lower offers a deferential gesture.

The movement to kneel down while offering the hand can be interrupted by the standing person who pulls the kneeling person up.

All gestures can be reciprocated by the other or not, depending on his status.

Who looks how and where during the greeting is maybe the most important signal given and received? Eyes on one's own feet, eyes on the feet of the other party, eyes averted to which side?

Younger persons, or the persons of lower status, avert eyes all the time while greeting an elder.

The initial gesture can be mirrored by the other if he wants to confer equal status. The mutual adaptation to the gesture offered by the other can be a subtle negotiation that may morph into an attempt to harmonisation.

The duration of each gesture is also significant, as is the firmness of the grip.

Gestures can be adjusted during the process. Both sides may adjust the expression of social distance or proximity as well as the relative power distance in the measure as they perceive the other and his intentions better during the ritual.

The greeting can be repeated to try to resolve status ambiguities; by trying to increase one's own status, or politely boost the other party's status. Repetition can also be used in more subtle ways until sufficient harmony is reached and a common base is established to take the conversation or interaction forward.

Sometimes status inconsistencies may exist. For instance, a younger man may have a higher position in a modern hierarchy, the older man in the traditional society. In this case a subtle negotiation takes place to decide which reference system is to be applied and shall inform the selection and form of the greeting. This negotiation's outcome may be influenced by external circumstances, such as the location, the presence of other people, etc.

In more relaxed surroundings, formal gestures, such as military and others, can also be used in a playful way to signify the absence of their original meaning and to signal that the context is free of the constraints that they usually imply.

Greetings may take a different form in joking relationships⁵² which the greetings signal right from the start of the interaction.

In societies where equality is a common and important value, greetings can be used as a mechanism to puncture inflated egos, to check self-aggrandisement, to ridicule people who pretend to be more than they are⁵³.

⁵² "Joking relationships" in African societies are well studied. They often exist between grandparents and their grandchildren, where the usual patterns of respect between children and older people are suspended. Cf. (RADCLIFFE-BROWN, 1940). They also exist between different groups and societies where they have the function of easing potential social and political tensions such as the well-studied Sanankuya ritual in Manding speaking societies.

Humour, however, is much more widely used to explore the space of the profane, strictly separated from the space of the sacred. It is often used to level power distances and to take the edge out of potentially embarrassing or stressing situations. The wide field of humour can be circumscribed by the theories of relief, of superiority and of incongruity.

⁵³ A few newly arrived, academically trained, national researchers, when joining a research organisation, insisted on being addressed by the title of "doctor" by the non-academic research staff. These, although well experienced and self-confident, could not refuse, as it would have been considered bad manners to openly defy the request. Instead, they started greeting each other, including the teaboy and the cleaning staff, as "doctor".

Casual greetings

If people walk on the footpaths in the bush, and encounter another party oncoming, for example a family returning from work in the fields, there are clear rules about greeting and the right of way. Who greets first? Who steps aside to let the others pass? (This may imply some discomfort and even some real or perceived danger, from snakes or landmines, say).

How many times people insist that the other party take precedence? When do they cede on their insistence and step back onto the path?

Greeting people in groups

When greeting people in groups, strict protocol is followed. The highest-ranking person is greeted first, then are people in descending order of rank and status. Usually, the people accompanying a person of high status arrange themselves physically in space in such a way that the highest-ranking person is given space to be greeted first, followed by the others in descending order⁵⁴. If the hierarchy is not clear, greetings are usually accompanied by an excuse and people are greeted according to their physical proximity.

It is quite frequent that people take others by the hand to draw them away from the others in order to have a private conversation out of earshot. This seems quite acceptable and is not considered rude.

Meeting armed people

On the rare occasions, when meeting a (friendly) armed party in the bush, after the initial friend-foe identification a general game of universal peace expressions starts. This is initiated by the officers in charge with formal military salutes, while the fighters may demonstrate their discipline, by arranging themselves in line or presenting their arms. The showing of raised empty hands, formal gestures of greetings, ceding the right of way are offered by both sides, repeatedly. Weapons are pointed to the ground or into the air or stowed away.

After the formalities have eased the initial tensions, more traditional greetings can be started.

⁵⁴ The driver of a minister of health always imitated the white dress of the minister, so that people had difficulties recognising who was the minister and who was the driver. “Whoever comes first, you greet as the minister”, they said, laughingly.

When encountering a hunting party, which can be quite dicey at night in the bush, people start talking in loud voices, to make their presence known. When the mutual presence is recognized, at first visible contact, weapons are demonstratively pointed away, break-action shotguns are opened and may be unloaded, rifles may be slung over the shoulder, rested against a tree, or laid on the ground, bows are put over the shoulder and arrows are put back into the quiver. Hunting lights are never pointed into other people's faces. Open hand gestures ensue. Everybody steps into the light, if possible. Only then the formal greetings with direct contact begin.

Greeting as a stand-alone exercise

Many greetings are just that. They can happen at a distance or in close proximity, but they do not lead to more. Their only function is to acknowledge the other's presence and a certain relationship existing between the greeting parties, even in a fleeting encounter between strangers in public places. When moving in smaller communities, a village or hamlet, greeting is required. Just passing other people without acknowledging their presences would be considered rather rude. Even after having greeted people in a village, when meeting them again later, it is required to acknowledge their presence through a distance signal.

Then there are ostensibly stand-alone greetings with the function of bridge-building between strangers. These work much better if there is another party known to both sides that can vouchsafe for both and help to establish a form of basic trust. If someone needs to get into contact with a high-ranking person, for instance in an organisation, he or she may usually take along a common acquaintance for the first meeting. This meeting is typically just for introduction and will not lead to an exchange of relevant information. But it may lead to the setting up of a follow-up meeting where the topics in question may be discussed at length and in depth.

This first formal meeting and the following period permit both parties to overcome the initial distrust (and even to make further enquiries about the other party) so that the follow-up meetings can be more substantial. To go beyond the greeting formalities in the first meeting would be considered bad form and could be counterproductive for the intended purposes. The transformation of the unknown into the known is a basic mechanism for the establishment of trust.

Indirect greetings

Often greetings from people not present are transmitted. This can be formal or informal and, depending on the situation, can take quite some time. News from and about the absent party may be conveyed. These greetings are usually reciprocated, and the messenger is politely requested to send greetings back. Before appearance of modern telecommunication these indirect greetings were the only way to communicate with distant people. Even now they still have an important function of reinforcing relationships between people separated by distance. Indirectly they also serve to strengthen trust between parties, by showing that they know people in common.

Greeting the authorities

When entering a territory, by custom, the first visit goes to the chief, headman, or village elder, in short, to the person responsible for the area. These greeting rituals are expected. They serve to recognise the power structure and to legitimise the presence of the visitor and his intended actions in the area. They may result in the chief detailing somebody to accompany the visiting party with instructions, which give additional legitimacy to the visitor. It might also warn the population that the visitor may not be trusted. Undoubtedly, the chief will receive exhaustive information about the visitor's actions and behaviour. The same goes for modern state authorities. It is always wise for external actors to greet the representatives of modern power institutions before acting in their territory. The authorities will be informed about their presence anyway and may consider not contacting them as a lack of consideration or worse.

There exists generalised knowledge in the Agrarian Societies about the correct communication channels for inside as well as for outside communication. Adults have this knowledge and will direct visitors to the responsible persons; children will take visitors to the next adult.

Non-greeting

In societies where social closeness is marked by physical proximity (who is seen in whose company) there is a clear obligation to greet. Even a careless failure to greet can be perceived as a violation of the social norms.

The refusal of greetings can be used to signal distance and it can be a clear sign of hostility⁵⁵. It may include looking the other way in an encounter, moving out of the way, to avoid a meeting, showing the back to somebody or to refuse the common gestures, such as a handshake or similar.

An outright intentional refusal usually causes embarrassing situations, which in many societies are to be avoided.

An accidental non-greeting caused by oversight calls for an apology.

Greetings as aggressive acts

Greetings may also be used aggressively, either to show contempt, to humiliate, or to signal social distance. This can be done in many ways. Either by shortening the greeting to an extent where it lacks the minimum time required, or by omitting certain forms of address, by a haughty expression, by a “dead fish” handshake, by a posture of immobility, by not raising up when seated, by not coming towards the other party. It can also be more subtle by following the form to the point but subtracting the expression of feelings altogether and thus sending out conflicting signals to the other. The procedure can equally be accompanied by staring at the other, or by inadequate averting of the eyes or body.

Greetings as dissimulation exercises

As in many conversations and interactions, openness and truthfulness are often not the ultimate purpose of a greeting. Therefore, greetings can also be used to dissimulate one's state or intentions or even to convey untrue intentions. This behaviour is a well-established social practice. People may ask, as a form of greeting, “where are you going?” and the answer may be completely innocuous “I am going there”⁵⁶. But this may go beyond the usual practice in many societies in the world where the question “how are you?” is supposed to be answered blandly with “I am fine”, irrespective of one's true state.

⁵⁵ One cannot not communicate, as Watzlawick has it in his first axiom. (WATZLAWICK; BEAVIN; JACKSON, 2017).

⁵⁶ Cf. the excellent study *Cultivating Knowledge: Development, Dissemblance, and Discursive Contradictions among the Diola of Guinea-Bissau*, by Joanna Davidson: “The daily repeated performance of “Ukai beh” and “Inje muh” acknowledges that people have a kind of power, not only to decide where they are going, but whether or not to reveal or conceal that information” (DAVIDSON, 2010).

Greetings may also be used to either produce a false sense of security in the other, or to fabricate social relations. In these not infrequent cases, even deference might be simulated together with equally untruthful expressions of emotions.

Court rituals

A clear distinction can be made between centralised and acephalous (or segmentary) societies⁵⁷. In the first, certain “court rituals” have evolved, regulating access and a more formal behaviour towards the chiefs and their court officials and, often armed, auxiliary staff. These rituals may be quite lengthy, sophisticated, and demanding.

In acephalous societies, access to the recognised authorities is much easier, normally only restricted by manners and custom but not enforced by staff. People are also less constrained to express their personal feelings. Respect is still expressed but rather along the lines of age, gender, descend and personal affection⁵⁸.

The waiting game

Many important or at least self-important people play the waiting game with their visitors. To have other people wait for you increases your status. This game is regularly played by bureaucrats, or by people imitating bureaucrats.

The high and mighty use this technique to impress on their visitors the power distance between them. As this is an everyday occurrence, people are used to it and suffer it in good grace and with patience.

It is no rare occurrence to have a room full of hundreds of people patiently waiting for hours for the appearance of the politically powerful.

Warrior's greeting

Greetings between fighters/warriors/enemies follow a very specific and structured ritual.

The traditional fighting forces of African Agrarian Societies are constituted through the male rites of passage or initiation ceremonies. Their training is a bonding exercise, and the recruits learn specific greetings rituals which identify them before their colleagues but also before their traditional officers. These rituals are in part open, in part invisible to the non-

⁵⁷ Cf. (SIGRIST, 2005), (SIGRIST, 2004).

⁵⁸ Cf. (KRAMER; SIGRIST, 1978)

initiated. The rites constitute some of the most important life experiences for their participants. Under the supervision of experienced guides, the recruits undergo profound changes of personality provoked and assisted through privations (living in the bush, separated from the families, without comforts), pain inflicted on them, the controlled use of drugs, and often experiencing the death of some of their peers. Often, they are also marked physically, by circumcision, scars, or tattoos.

When young fighters want to challenge others for a fight, which they not infrequently do, this is in many societies also strictly ritualised, with specific greeting rituals. These might consist of a few stones thrown over the fence into the compound of the opponent, accompanied by shouted insults. Combined, this greeting usually brings the opponent out into the public space where a fight – either unarmed wrestling or a fight with sticks – promptly ensues.

In more formal settings, like in wrestling contests, a ritual greeting between contestants always precedes the actual fighting, as does a final salute, like a respectful bow or handshake.

In modern military organisations, the forms of military salutes are adopted that show the military hierarchic position. After the formal greeting is over, and formal power relations are established, more traditional forms may be applied in an exercise to institute or reinforce the social relationship.

Imported signals

Even in the most traditional settings as, for instance, between old villagers, but much more by the youth, in greetings, quite frequently, words, signs and gestures are adopted from other cultures. This is not specific for African societies but plays an important role there too. Old villagers may be observed including quotations from the scriptures or the Qur'an into their traditional greetings, while youngsters seem to borrow foreign words and phrases, mostly popularised by the mass media, to convey a modern feeling.

Certain groups of youth use their own greeting rituals, often quite intricate, and usually inspired by movies of other youth cultures in distant places, often from the Americas with their distinct ghetto cultures. These are used to mark the inclusion to a certain group and the exclusion of all the others. They involve, many times, refined interactions with the hands.

Greeting the sun, the day and the spirits

In many of these societies there are greeting rituals which go beyond the social interaction. The use of elementary forms of interpersonal communication beyond the realm of

humans shows that societies do not limit their self-perception to their kin, but interact with nature in a wider sense, if only symbolically, but not less real for that. There exist rituals to greet the sun when it rises in the morning. These greetings of the sun, and the new day, which in many cultures in the world are understood as “morning prayers”, in African Agrarian Societies mark the change from the night, and the reality of the world of the dreams to the reality of everyday life⁵⁹. These greeting rituals may be performed close to the house shrines that exist in many dwellings. On the social level the morning greetings have the function to re-engage with the others, be they family, neighbours, or community and to reaffirm their existence as part of more encompassing reality.

Often these rituals find a correspondent with the “evening prayers”, understood as saying goodbye to the day and to welcome the night.

Contacts with the spirits⁶⁰ may be formal encounters, by people visiting their shrines and other places of worship in order to look for protection, to seek endorsement for planned endeavours, to celebrate contracts with the spirits⁶¹ for specific or general purposes. These might include, for instance, averting ill-health for family members, protection for their travels, success in love, advancement in their careers, success in emigration, protection against bullets in war, etc. The destruction of enemies or the failure of their projects may also be wished for. In these formal encounters, specific greeting rituals are employed which usually include some form of preparation, such as ritual cleansing.

When a contact with a spirit is intended through dreams, certain rituals can be performed before going to sleep, to inform the spirits that a contact is requested. These rituals establish a connection between the everyday existence and the dream existence. The recounting of dreams which is quite frequent, conveys experiences from the dream-world to the day-world. Thus, we find a two-way, bidirectional link between the dream-worlds and the live-worlds.

⁵⁹ Cf. Jung, expressed this, in the language of his time, when recounting an experience with the Elgonyi: “If you can put yourself in the mind of the primitive, you will at once understand why this is so. [...] What happens outside also happens in him, and what happens in him also happens outside.

At sunrise they spit on their hands and then hold the palms towards the sun as it comes over the horizon. ‘We are happy that the night is past’, they say. [...]. Sunrise and his own feeling of deliverance are for him the same divine experience, just as night and his fear are the same thing. Naturally his emotions are more important to him than physics; therefore what he registers is his emotional fantasies. For him night means snakes and the cold breath of spirits, whereas morning means the birth of a beautiful god” (p. 40). (JUNG; JAFFÉ, 1989).

⁶⁰ (OGUNNIYI, 2014).

⁶¹ (CROWLEY, 1990). These rituals usually include elaborate forms of gift-giving.

Chance encounters with spirits are also quite frequent. They may happen everywhere but seem to be more frequent in the bush, when people venture out alone, as do travellers and hunters. Specific greetings are vital in these contacts. The friend-foe identification is in part provided by body ornaments, amulets and similar devices that signal to the spirits the belonging to a specific group.

Leave-taking

After meetings, conversations, interactions etc., there comes the parting. In fact, leave-taking quite often is as elaborate as the initial greeting. In leave-taking, many of the gestures used in greeting are also applied. Instead of producing proximity and meeting, however, they express growing distance and eventual separation of bodies and minds⁶².

The symbolic value of executing the leave-taking should not be underestimated. It also involves intricate and rather multifaceted forms. Usually, it is not just the short good-bye, but rather a drawn-out process to be repeated in variations a few times. It serves to close an act of communication and allows to smooth out any tensions that might have crept into the process. The elaborate forms and lengthy procedures of leave-taking give the necessary time for a disentanglement of people who have shared time, meaning and a part of their existence.

Proper leave-taking reinforces the relationship established by ritualising the (temporary) separation. Through its form, length, feelings displayed, etc., it opens (or not) the possibilities of future contacts and communication. In many societies the leave-taking includes declarations of shared unity, even when people will be separated by distance. This is expressed in many forms that emphasise unity even if there will be a separation in space such as: „We are together!”

It usually includes repeatedly thanking the other part for their time, their company and much else. Although the same gestures may be applied, as in the initial greeting, it is perfectly clear for the observer that parting is quite distinct from meeting. A certain symmetry with the initial greeting notwithstanding, leave-taking is a fundamentally different act.

Leave-taking quite often is used as an opportunity to send messages to the family of the other part, or to people that are known by both parts.

⁶² For example, the same type of handshake might be applied as in greeting. But nobody will confound a greeting with a leave-taking.

Not going through the prescribed set of motions is considered rude and may leave bad feelings behind.

However, the prescribed formulas for leave-taking may also serve to extricate oneself from situations which are unwanted or unpleasant. Especially when meetings have not brought the desired results, the forms are followed to the dot.

If the communication process or the interaction went well, the positive results achieved, between the initial greetings and the leave-taking may be demonstrated by the differences displayed in both rituals. If promises were made during a conversation, they are confirmed by the intensity of the leave-taking ritual. The contrary may also be the case. In low-trust surroundings the correct reading of these signals is of the essence.

The long good-bye

A short example may exemplify this: The research centre one of the authors worked in, was visited once a year by the highest and most respected figure of the most important religious community in the country. The visitor was announced by the hushed silence of the office staff. After elaborate greeting rituals, we sat down for tea and a chat. He made it very clear that he never visited any government office or other office at all. After the meeting was over, his leave-taking was even more significant than the initial greetings. We said good-bye in the meeting room with a handshake, both of us touching the others shoulder with the other hand and bowing equally deeply away, eyes averted. This was then repeated on the veranda. And then a third time in the street, outside the gate, to where the host had accompanied him. This mutual showing of respect gave not only a great boost to the morale of the staff but, as it was widely talked about, certainly contributed to the granting of access to many ethnic societies in the country for our researchers.

The hunter's good-bye

In certain societies the hunter needs to perform a comprehensive leave-taking ritual with the person nominated by the lineage as responsible for the magic pasturing of the wild game⁶³ and to receive his blessings. In this leave-taking the hunter recognises the authority of the lineage, pays his respect to the responsible person, accepts instructions and prohibitions, and announces his venture into the bush. This leave-taking gives some magic protection to the

⁶³ (SCHIEFER, 2002).

hunter from the hazards of the hunt. Implicitly he acknowledges that he will come back with game to share, or at least to report everything that he has observed, to the traditional game manager. These or similar mechanisms also occur, in slightly varying forms, when other natural resources are to be exploited, such as fish, etc. In this way, these formalities play an important role in the management of natural resources.

Learning how to greet

Besides the predominant traditional learning through observation and imitation, members of the African Agrarian Societies, both male and female, are formally and informally trained during many years, either by direct instruction, backed up by strict sanctions, or, more frequently, by subtle nudging, in order to master the greeting rituals. Imitation is the way of transmission of not only the Old Knowledge, but also of behaviour, values, emotions, operational knowledge and the like in a transgenerational chain. Children and youngsters imitate elder, more experienced people. But imitation is not only something learners do; it cuts both ways. Parents also imitate their children in order to communicate better with them. However, learners are actively encouraged, in certain situations with much emphasis, to imitate the experienced elders; they are expected to imitate. By imitation of the external forms, they also grow into the emotional and relational internal states that will form their personality and their identity⁶⁴.

Even in the secret initiation ceremonies⁶⁵ of many ethnic groups, greeting is considered an integral and constitutive part of the management of social relations and a distinct “subject matter”. The mastery of multiple forms goes along with the hierarchy of initiation. The higher the level of initiation, the more secret forms people learn and are licensed to employ⁶⁶.

These teachings also include the knowledge how to greet the spirits that people might encounter – which are by no means all of a kindly disposition.

⁶⁴ Cf. *Mind, Self, and Society* by (MEAD, 2009) and *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method* by (BLUMER, 2009).

⁶⁵ “El ceremonial es el procedimiento técnico para enseñar verdades indemostrables (NICOLÁS GÓMEZ DÁVILA; PINZON; VOLPI, 2001).

⁶⁶ On the highest level of initiation, the trans-societal secret societies that span big parts of the continent are established.

It includes many secret signals that reflect the necessity of “friend-foe identification” as well as the building of trust between people belonging to the same relevant group even in the presence of others who do not. The secret signals allow the passing of information about people present without these noticing. Looking at the other’s feet does not only serve to avert your eyes as a show of respect, but also to detect non-obvious foot signals which are not perceived by the non-initiated⁶⁷.

The acquisition of the complete forms of greeting is considered vital to becoming an adult member of society. The propagated ideal for the youth is not, as in some modern industrialised Western societies, individual independence, revolt, or disruption, but rather obedience, responsibility, solidarity, respect, and harmony. As in many other societies where “the individual” does not have the illusion of being “the master of his own destiny” the highest ideal for a person is patience. Without patience there is no virtue.

A few examples may suffice to understand part of the teachings in the initiation rituals. In the countryside, if a visitor comes to a village, there is an elaborate protocol: how to enter a village? The visitor does not only have to identify the people he or she has to greet first, which might involve some patient inquiries and intermediaries, but he or she also has to pass through a lengthy ritual of greeting the highest-ranking people. This always implies that visitors have to establish direct personal contact. Without physical interaction, a person may be physically present without being socially acknowledged. If physical presence within a certain time does not move into recognised social presence through physical contact, unease might result. Correctly entering a village or community implies a discreet display of the proficiency in the forms and provides the responsible people with opportunities to evaluate the visitor⁶⁸.

The apparently simple act of entering a compound in some societies in the southern part of the continent requires detailed knowledge⁶⁹. On a first visit, the guest is obliged to leave through the door he entered, accompanied by the host. On later visits, the requirements of the

⁶⁷ If a foreigner is being introduced into a group, the group might be subtly warned if he speaks the local language.

⁶⁸ When doing research or interacting with these societies in other ways, we found it useful to use as team leaders only people who were initiated into the societies where the team was going to work.

⁶⁹ Through which door must the visitor pass through the palisades? How to make his presence known? After passing the outer space, which is the space to go to? Where to wait for the owner to be greeted and invited? Who passes first through the openings into the official reception space? On which of the logs to sit as a guest? Who sits who? When leaving, who passes through the gate first?

protocol are somewhat eased. In many of these compounds there is a little space between the outer area and the inner compound dedicated to visitors who arrive at night and might rest there without waking the inhabitants. They are neither outside nor inside. Only the next morning, by being officially greeted, their presence is formally acknowledged, and they are welcomed as guests.

To acquire the complete set of forms of greeting and leave-taking, including the finer points of etiquette, entails decades of learning. And, as with all learning, some people are better at it than others.

Intercultural fallacies

The continued successes of the internationalisation of business and the repeated failures of development interventions have brought the question of intercultural contact to the fore⁷⁰.

The numerous dimensions of intercultural communication influence, to different degrees and according to circumstances, greetings between people from the Agrarian Societies and strangers.

In fact, some of the specifics of greetings can be observed from examples where they are improperly executed and therefore fail their purpose.

A short example may illustrate this: In a research centre in the capital of a West-African country, a new European researcher joined the team. He used to come to the office, and, with a friendly “good morning”, pass through the outer office and go into his own workplace. After a few days some members of the staff talked to the director and asked: “What is the matter with the fellow? Doesn’t he like us? Is he a racist? He does not greet us!” When the director told him about the complaints, he was completely taken aback: “But I do greet them”, he insisted, “I say Good morning! I never fail!” It had to be explained to him, that he would have to do the rounds, shake hands with everybody, ask about their health, the health and wellbeing of the families, and so on.

Not knowing the formal ways of greeting, even when applying the correct words (which is usually the first thing foreigners learn), can be considered a lack of knowledge and familiarity with local customs. This may be tolerated in foreigners for some time, but it can also be

⁷⁰ For an early example on the business side, see Trompenaars (1997).

interpreted as a lack of interest and education⁷¹. Failing to greet in a proper way can be perceived as rudeness. But often tolerance and pragmatism prevail.

The lack of knowledge about the other can be serious impediment to establish meaningful and productive communication. The uncertainties about the other's status can, in the case of foreigners, cut both ways. As different cultures use different symbols to express their status, misreading the other's status can induce both parts into errors, which frequently lead to cognitive dissonances⁷².

The specific gender status of Agrarian Societies where men and women are accorded distinct roles and where specific gender attributed behaviour is expected (representation in public spaces, decision making in public affairs, ways of greeting foreigners, to name just a few examples), can be suspended when dealing with foreign women who interact with the societies. Thus, foreign women can be attributed “male status” which allows them, for example, to enter the spaces and to play roles usually reserved for men. They can also be greeted in a gender-neutral manner.

The perception of time as well as the rhythm of action differ greatly between agrarian and industrialised societies which are the origin of much of the personnel involved in development activities. International staff of development projects, for instance, often experience great difficulties in adapting to the slow rhythm of Agrarian Societies where time is not measured by the clock⁷³.

The relative importance given to the establishment of personal relationship to the detriment of “the matter at hand” is another potential cause of misunderstandings and eventual frictions. Coming to the point too soon, without giving enough attention and time to greetings, does not only violate the cultural norms, but it may also be counterproductive. Executing the greeting rituals properly, with the necessary repetitions, gives space for the unsaid to take its effect.

⁷¹ The staff of a research centre at times commented on international researchers: “The so and so anthropologist has been in the country for more than a year and he still does not know how to greet an Elder!”

⁷² Often international staff of NGO and the like shun the most obvious status symbols such as proper, formal dress and the like, although, having cars and good houses, they could certainly afford it (at least in the perception of the local societies). Underplaying their own social status, as is custom in some groups in many Western societies, often sends exactly the wrong signals to members of the African Societies and to not only to them.

⁷³ Cf. (SCHRÖTER; ELIAS, 1988).

Proper greetings, when initiating a meeting, may also help to identify the real decision makers who are not always the people with the highest formal status⁷⁴.

Proper leave-taking is of the same importance as the initial greeting. During the leave-taking decisions can be subtly expressed, as can intentions of the actors who often have to consult their constituencies before assuming formal agreements. These constituencies may include, beyond their families, lineages, etc., the spiritual instances who might have the ultimate say in vital matters and whose influence might be crucial for the building of consensus.

Another point of possible misunderstandings are the typical emotions shown in greetings, the human warmth conveyed through a ready smile even in chance encounters can easily be misread by people from cultures where this kind of expression of feelings is much more restricted to the intimacy of family and friends. On the other hand, people from the North are often perceived as cold and distant, because they do not express their real or not so real feelings in the usual friendly manner. But even a very friendly greeting does not mean that a relationship exists. The amiable feelings and emotions displayed may be intended to disarm potential hostile feelings rather than to establish a real connection. The mastery of the greeting is also a sign of the con-artist and the politician.

Conclusions, questions and interrogations

Many African Agrarian societies are in contact with the outside world through different types of interventions. Most of these external interventions in African societies have a very strong communication component. State and civil society actors try to pass messages to them, as for example in health campaigns or they try to establish communication channels, through development projects, etc. Many external interventions are basically communication exercises that aim to change, with more or less subtlety, behavioural patterns. These communication processes are rarely efficient. The obsession with modern mass communication and their technical bases that dominates research⁷⁵ seems to have obstructed a clear view on direct

⁷⁴ When doing research on anti-colonial war in a West African country, an extremely sensitive issue at the time, the societies used to send some veterans of the “liberation struggle” without any real knowledge to the interviews. The really important and knowledgeable actors stayed in the background to wait and see what the research was all about. Only when sufficient trust was established, they came to the fore. After some time, our research staff was able to screen the interviewees merely through the greeting rituals and send the too eager ones politely away.

⁷⁵ See for example the elaboration of the Shannon/Weaver model of communication which was derived from the technical transmission of information and extremely useful in this context. (SHANNON; WEAVER, 1998).

interpersonal communication⁷⁶, of which the greeting is an essential part. For everybody who deals with other societies, be they government officials, staff of development organisations or researchers, it is of paramount importance to get their communication right. The specific communication processes in these Agrarian Societies also provide the background for more modern processes, be they direct interpersonal or media based. More modern forms of greeting are derived from or strongly influenced by the more traditional form developed over thousands of years by these societies which impregnate modern urban culture.

Therefore, a few questions arise that can only be answered by future research.

- How do greeting rituals translate and transform in poly-ethnic spaces such as big urban centres?
- How do they influence the functioning of modern or peri-modern organisations?
- How do they influence intercultural contacts?
- How are they influenced by intercultural direct contacts or media-based contacts?
- How do traditional greeting rituals change when new communication technologies evolve and become available?
- What technologies are preferred and why?
- How do traditional communication processes influence the use of modern communication technologies?

The study of modern communications, and specifically of modern, urban greetings as well as communication through modern, electronic media could greatly benefit from a better and more profound understanding of the more traditional communication processes. So could probably most people who deal with African Agrarian Societies.

It now seems to influence most communication studies. The unreflected transfer of this model to interpersonal communication has caused severe damage to the understanding of direct human communication.

⁷⁶ For a different approach see (PAULI; JUNG, 2014).

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